

VZCZCXRO4089
PP RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHUJA #1959/01 2091402
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 281402Z JUL 06
FM AMEMBASSY ABUJA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6608
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUEHYD/AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE 0157
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHFMISS/CDR USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001959

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ELTN](#) [PHUM](#) [KCOR](#) [ASEC](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: THE ROAD TO CALABAR

¶1. Summary. Emboffs recently took an overland trip from Abuja to Enugu, and then onward to Calabar, traveling on 2 of Nigeria's 3 "national roads." Poor road and vehicle conditions, appalling standards of driver conduct, and a lack of signage all provided challenges throughout the journey. This was compounded by severely restricted fuel availability and the continuous presence of overtly corrupt police checkpoints. While these problems present a challenge for Embassy travel, they are a daily fact of life for Nigerians and restrict both business development and the delivery of government services throughout the nation, perhaps a significant issue as the 2007 national elections approach. End summary.

Road Conditions

¶2. Most of the travel from Abuja to Enugu was done on the A2 and A3 "freeways." While the A3 freeway--the Enugu-Port Harcourt road--was mostly "dualized" (a divided highway), the A2 freeway was mostly "face you, face me" (two lane road). Even where each road was dualized, significant portions existed where one side of the road was in such poor repair that only the other side was used for traffic in both directions. Neither the start nor the end of these diversions were marked by signs, and drivers seemed not to adapt their driving to the changed traffic condition.

¶3. From Enugu to Calabar, travel was again on the A3 freeway until Aba (the road then continues on to Port Harcourt), and then on a primary road to Calabar. This road was the only overland route into Calabar, and was heavily trafficked by large trucks (often too large for the road) taking goods in and out of the city. As the terrain turned more coastal, more bridges were necessary along the road, and were often in poor repair--most with at least one hole in the guardrail and a truck or two in the creek below.

¶4. The primary roads, almost exclusively of the "face you, face me" variety, were in horrible condition. There were areas of the roads that were so cratered that they were almost impassable by cars with insufficient ground clearance. Even SUVs with more appropriate ground clearance were forced to slow to less than 20km/hour to pass many of these defects. The only road repair projects ongoing were impromptu by local "entrepreneurs" who, as they filled holes with soil dug from the side of the road, would beg for some show of appreciation from passing motorists.

¶5. Road signage was almost non-existent, and there was frequent confusion about which turn to take. More than once, Emboffs had to rely on the kindness of strangers to direct them to their destination, and--owing to this confusion--even took an unexpected detour through Uyo. Maps of Nigeria are

also rather rare and tend to be of a scale too large to be useful for most. A recently produced road atlas of Nigeria, the first of its type, proved invaluable on the trip, though distribution of this product is seemingly limited and it will thus not benefit most Nigerians. The price tag is equivalent of twenty days wages for the average Nigerian, further limiting its distribution.

¶6. The poor condition of many of the vehicles on Nigeria's roads, especially of large trucks, significantly increases the danger of overland travel. The sides of the roads were littered with the broken down and burned out skeletons of vehicles, and faster moving vehicles frequently cause as much problem as their slow moving counterparts. Pedestrians, merchants, and cattle are all also frequent roadway obstructions as are disabled vehicles left in the middle of the roadway.

Fuel Availability

¶7. Between towns, there were many gas stations along the roads, but almost all were closed--and most appeared to have been so for some time. In Enugu, the privately-owned gas stations were selling gas for 75 Naira/liter, but most had no fuel. The publicly-owned (NNPC) station was selling fuel for 72 Naira/liter, with limited availability, and there was a 1 km queue down the road with drivers waiting for a fuel delivery. The Embassy driver was forced to buy fuel on the black market, the only readily-available source, paying 116 Naira/liter. In Calabar, fuel was readily available at both NNPC and privately-owned stations at 69 Naira/liter.

ABUJA 00001959 002 OF 002

Security

¶8. Perhaps the most striking element of the trip was the constant presence of police roadblocks, including the Nigerian Police Force (NPF), Police Mobile Force (MOPOL), Federal Highway Patrol, Federal Road Safety Commission, and the Customs Service (with an occasional soldier mixed in at some roadblocks). On the return trip to Abuja, Emboffs counted 40 roadblocks in the 5 hours (339 km) from Calabar to Enugu. If the roadblocks were evenly distributed, this would mean a roadblock every 7-8 minutes, but the roadblocks were far from evenly distributed. In the 9 km through Aba, there were 11 roadblocks--when stopped at one roadblock, Emboffs could often see the next one just down the road. Corruption was so overt among the police at these Aba roadblocks, who had cargo pockets stuffed full of cash, that the officers were even seen making change for bribes if their victims did not have small enough bills (note: the Embassy driver informed Emboffs that the price of a bribe has recently risen from 20 Naira to 50 Naira, about 38 cents. End Note).

¶9. Despite the overtly corrupt nature of these roadblocks, several interlocutors in Calabar said that the police presence made the road safe from armed robbers, a serious problem throughout Nigeria. Despite their complaining, most Nigerians at this point seem to have accepted these hasty extortion points as a way of life if they want to travel around their own country, and many seem to have accepted at least a limited value for crime deterrence, though most are still hesitant about traveling these same roads during hours of darkness.

Comment

¶10. Overland travel in Nigeria will remain a significant barrier to commerce, investment, and governance for the foreseeable future. Until significant investment is made in improving the roads and fuel distribution and an even more

significant effort is made to reduce police corruption, Nigeria will suffer. The cost of operating a business rises as transportation time, fuel cost, and vehicle repair costs climb, and these same factors limit the ability of the federal and state government services to reach their targets.

This limit on the ability of government to reach out to the people could become significant during 2007's national elections.

¶11. The lack of basic road safety, as well as other travel challenges throughout Nigeria, also provides a significant restriction to the Mission's ability to travel throughout the country. Airlines do not reach many areas of the country, and air travel presents a whole different set of challenges, dangers, and restrictions. Other diplomatic and development missions in Nigeria as well as the few NGOs present recognize this same set of problems in their efforts to travel the country.

¶12. Interestingly, in the Calabar Museum, there was a statement by Louis Edet, Nigeria's first indigenous Police Commissioner, from around the time of independence saying his two priorities for the Nigerian police were to improve the force's public image and to reduce corruption. Fifty years hence, the mission remains the same.

FUREY